

Television screenwriting: continuity and change

Redvall, Eva N.; Cook, John R.

Published in:
Journal of Screenwriting

DOI:
[10.1386/josc.6.2.131_2](https://doi.org/10.1386/josc.6.2.131_2)

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Redvall, EN & Cook, JR 2015, 'Television screenwriting: continuity and change', *Journal of Screenwriting*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 131-136. https://doi.org/10.1386/josc.6.2.131_2

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please view our takedown policy at <https://edshare.gcu.ac.uk/id/eprint/5179> for details of how to contact us.

Television screenwriting – continuity and change

Eva N. Redvall and John R. Cook

There is much talk about this present era being the golden age of television fiction. Or maybe the second golden age of television fiction, if one counts the late 1940s to the early 1960s in US television as the first golden years (Marschall 1995) or in Britain, the period of the 1960s and 1970s. Or maybe it is the third golden age, if the period from *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1989) to *ER* (1994–2009) was the second golden age for the United States (Thompson 1997). Or even the fourth golden age, if *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) a decade and a half ago started a new streak of golden years (Martin 2013)... Some scholars and newspaper television critics like to outline golden ages, and while there can be many debates to be had about the number or nature of any of these so-called ‘golden’ periods in television drama, most people would nevertheless agree that at least ‘something different’ is going on today.

However, what this ‘something different’ is might be harder than ever before to define clearly, since television series are now travelling internationally on many different platforms, creating new trends, waves and viewing habits with a speed which makes it hard to pin down the latest developments even before new ones emerge. It is an exciting period of transitions, and while both scholars and journalistic reviewers might have difficulties in defining exactly what is going on, one thing is certain: it is an interesting

time for studying television writing since the status, production and distribution of television are changing so fast, with screenwriters and the process of screenwriting being important elements of this change.

Whereas television has traditionally been discussed in the United States as ‘a producer’s medium’ (e.g. Newcomb and Alley 1983), the focus is now more on television as the medium of the writer, the writer-producer or the showrunner (e.g. Kallas 2013). In the dominant US television industry, showrunners such as Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*) or Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) have emerged as celebrated creators and Writers’ Room commanders. In Europe, smaller production cultures such as in Denmark have found success with public service ‘Nordic Noir’ series that are based upon ideas of creating fiction marked by the ‘one vision’ of the head writer (Redvall 2013). As discussed by television scholar Elke Weissmann, there are signs, therefore, of ‘reorientations’ and small nation ‘counter-flows’ in the current international market (2012: 191), with new kinds of stories circulating, and online streaming services offering a wide variety of opportunities for getting different kinds of content and formats to audiences. Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver have recently argued that if content is king, distribution is now King Kong (2013). Television writers can create wonderful new works, but someone needs to bring them to audiences, and in the new world of powerful digital players, this ‘someone’ is no longer necessarily the traditional broadcasters.

There is no doubt that much is changing, calling for research into these changes and their implications for television writers and the television screenplay (or teleplay). There are new ways of commissioning, of understanding the nature of storytelling for television and of working in a fast-moving industry with an increasingly international

rather than simply national outlook. In the 1990s, when discussing the history of television writing in the United States, Tom Stempel argued that one could think of television writers as ‘storytellers to the nation’ (1992). Today, writers can potentially be ‘storytellers to all nations’ even if they continue to remain working purely within the confines of their particular, national television culture.

However, while much is changing – and while it can often be fun to try to debate and define more precisely what, for several years now, has been called ‘quality television’ (e.g. Jancovich and Lyons 2003; McCabe and Akass 2007) – many things remain in line with how work has always been carried out, and certain ideas of quality and best practice stay the same. As argued by scholars such as David Hesmondhalgh, the creative industries are marked by a constant interplay between continuity and change (2013). Things do not change overnight and even if today might seem a time of marked transformation, many of the basic conditions for television writing and production remain the same. From a screenwriting research point of view, television writing is still fundamentally about someone wanting to tell a certain kind of story in the best way possible. The aim of this special ‘TV Writers’ issue of *The Journal of Screenwriting* is therefore to focus upon both change *and* continuity, acknowledging the changing situation of today but also offering historical perspectives that may help contextualize this current moment in TV writing.

The articles in this issue approach television writing from a broad range of perspectives, looking at it both as a practice and at the prominent voices and works within television drama, now and then, which have contributed to its advancement. Taking a historical stance, Joshua M. Heuman analyses authorship in terms of the divided cultural

work processes of TV writing. The collaborative nature of writing and of producing television has always challenged traditional (romantic) notions of individual authorship. This has led to several theoretical discussions of how to think through individual versus collective authorship in film and media production (for an overview, see e.g. Gray and Johnson 2013). But these collaborative work processes also have very material implications within the legal sphere, for example, in terms of copyright ownership. Based on case study examples from mid-twentieth-century idea law, Heuman explores discourses around broadcast writing, focusing particularly on the perennial problem of ideas protection. His discussed examples and discourses mirror current tensions in television writing, and the article closes by addressing the resonance of his historical cases to present-day developments.

Related to Heuman's discussions of how to understand and protect ideas, Tom Steward focuses on issues of authorship with reference to writers of individual episodes of long-running American television drama series. His article discusses the agency of guest writers and returning episode writers and addresses the position and status of these screenwriting roles within US TV drama production, as well as within general television criticism. Based on two case studies, the article raises the question of whether it is possible for returning episode writers to create a thematically or stylistically distinct voice within the context of a long-running series. The analysis of an episode by David Mamet for *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1980–1987) and of several teleplays by David Chase for *The Rockford Files* (NBC, 1974–1980) leads to the conclusion that authorship can be attributed to writers of American television drama series working in a temporary or secondary capacity. The article thus raises highly relevant questions in terms of

rethinking authorship with regard to showrunner/episode writer-relations as well as reconsidering the work for popular TV drama series coming out of Writers' Rooms.

Christine Becker's article also addresses the work of specific writers, but focuses on how writers frame their explanations for creative choices in their work and on how writers now have the opportunity to enter into dialogue with their audience members about the way that particular series evolve and – not least – end. The article analyses the three respective different endings of the original British series version of *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006–2007); its follow-up sequel series *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC, 2008–2010) and the American remake of *Life on Mars* (ABC, 2008–2009), focusing on justifications for the different choices of narrative resolution employed within each. The article discusses these choices in terms of creative versus industrial concerns, pointing to how writers of long-running series have to take audience responses much more into account today when making screenplay decisions – particularly in relation to how they should end.

Radha O'Meara's article takes a closer look at the nature of episodic storytelling, focusing upon conflicting conceptions of character change in television series. The article identifies three different kinds of character change: when characters experience significant life events; when they express intense emotions or when they display observable contrasts in behaviour. Based on textual analysis, the article argues that rather than thinking about character change in popular television series as defining moments, it seems more conducive to think of characters in television series as accumulating different kinds of changes as series evolve.

While O'Meara focuses generally on how to think of characters and their personal traits within television fiction, Steven Maras' article homes in upon the specific ethical

implications of story and character work in the television dramas of British screenwriter Jimmy McGovern. Arguing in favour of discussing screenwriting through ‘an ethical lens’, Maras uses scenes or episodes from various McGovern series – *Cracker* (ITV, 1993–2007), *Hearts and Minds* (Channel 4, 1995) and *Accused* (BBC, 2010–2012) – to explore McGovern’s work in relation to key ethical concepts of how we treat others, how we form judgements and how we balance loyalties and roles. The article ends by outlining further questions for screenwriting research in terms of thinking of screenwriting as ‘ethical work’ and of what might be achieved by considering certain ‘ethical philosophies’ in relation to screenwriting practice.

Whereas the article by Maras proposes to think more carefully about ‘the ethics of screenwriting’, Monika Bednarek reflects upon what she calls the ‘linguistics of screenwriting’. The article provides an overview of five categories of linguistic research into dialogue in episodic television fiction with the aim of raising awareness of what linguistic research can offer screenwriting studies and of the merits of interdisciplinary approaches. As analysed by Bednarek in her article, language plays a very important part in terms of character and world-building in TV fiction series, and there are many interesting perspectives to be gained by focusing both on specific issues of language in television series and of how these relate to wider aspects of society.

As can be seen from the above summary, the six research articles in this issue cover very different approaches to screenwriting research, both from historical and current perspectives, and they range from specific case studies of the work of particular practitioners to wider discussions of how to theorize screenwriting and screenplays for television. In addition, two final pieces offer interviews with acclaimed screenwriters on

the nature of their work. Beth Johnson has interviewed British television writer and showrunner Paul Abbott about his work in television over four decades. The interview draws on examples from his many acclaimed productions, whilst addressing topical issues such as whether current commissioners have faith in audiences and how Abbott is now mentoring other writers – from format concept to screenplay to full production – through his own production company (with attached writers’ studio), AbbottVision.

Russell T. Davies is one of the many screenwriters who have acknowledged Abbott’s importance to British television drama, nominating him as his ‘TV hero’ (Frost 2011). Davies started his career working on children’s television series, including on Paul Abbott’s *Children’s Ward* (ITV, 1989–2000), before going on to create and write his own series for adults, amongst them the award-winning and groundbreaking *Queer As Folk* (Channel 4, 1999–2000). He later famously went on to become the showrunner for the revival (2005–present) of the classic British TV series *Doctor Who* (1963–). In Line Langebek Knudsen’s interview with Davies, the screenwriter reflects upon his career and gives his thoughts on screenwriting, including on his three new shows, *Cucumber*, *Banana* and *Tofu*, which have been created as a multi-platform experience for 2015.

We believe that the voices and opinions of practitioners are important sources of knowledge to screenwriting studies. There is great value in recounting the personal recollections of screenwriters and in attending to their perceptions of best practice and quality. This is especially so if one wants better to understand how continuity versus change, imitation versus innovation, ‘content as king’ versus ‘distribution as King Kong’, are all impacting upon the current landscape for television writing.

Before signing off to allow you all to explore in more depth these various fascinating contributions to the study of TV writing, not to mention the numerous book reviews, we would just like to take this opportunity to thank Jill Nelmes for all her hard work with *The Journal of Screenwriting* over the past years. Jill has been the Principal Editor of *The Journal* since the first issue in 2010, and she has made sure that the issues have been of a consistently high-quality and interesting reads. Her drive and dedication have been sources of inspiration for many people within The Screenwriting Research Network, and it is an impressive testimony to the work of Jill, her co-editors and the rest of the team around *JOSC* that *The Journal* is now one of Intellect's most popular. We wish Jill all the best with her new projects and are happy to announce that Steven Price has accepted to take over from Jill the role of Principal Editor, commencing with this issue. *The Journal* thus continues to be in the very best hands and we look forward to continuing in future to read all the high-quality screenwriting research that will be featured within its pages.

References

Cunningham, Stuart and Silver, Jon (2013), *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Frost, Vicky (2011), 'My TV hero: Russell T. Davies on Paul Abbott', *The Guardian*, 20 June, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/jun/20/my-tv-hero-paul-abbott>. Accessed 5 December 2014.

Gray, Jonathan and Johnson, Derek (2013), *A Companion to Media Authorship*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hesmondhalgh, David (2013), *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd ed., London: Sage.

Jancovich, Mark and Lyons, James (eds) (2003), *Quality Popular Television*, London: BFI.

Kallas, Christina (2013), *Inside the Writer's Room: Conversations with American TV Writers*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marschall, Rick (1995), *The Golden Age of Television*, New York: Smithmark Pub.

Martin, Brett (2013), *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*, London: Faber and Faber.

McCabe, Janet and Akass, Kim (2007), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, London: I B Tauris & Co.

Newcomb, Horace and Alley, Richard S. (1983), *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Redvall, Eva N. (2013), *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stempel, Tom (1992), *Storytellers to the Nation: A History of American Television Writing*, New York: Continuum.

Thompson, Robert J. (1997), *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Weissmann, Elke (2012), *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence Between the US and UK*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Sopranos (1999–2007), Cr: David Chase; USA, HBO, 58 mins x 86 eps.

Hill Street Blues (1981–1987), Cr: Steven Bochco, Michael Kozoll; USA, NBC, 49 mins x 146 eps.

ER (1994–2009), Cr: Michael Crichton; USA, NBC, 45 mins x 331 eps.

Cucumber (2015), Cr: Russell T. Davies; UK, Red Production Company for Channel 4, 45 mins x 8 eps.

Banana (2015), Cr: Russell T. Davies; UK, Red Production Company for E4, 23 mins x 8 eps.

Tofu (2015), Cr: Russell T. Davies; UK, Red Production Company for 4oD, 11 mins x 8 eps.

The Wire (2002–2008), Cr: David Simon; USA, HBO, 60 mins x 60 eps.

Mad Men (2007–2015), Cr: Matthew Weiner; USA, AMC, 47 mins x 92 eps.

Breaking Bad (2008–2013), Cr: Vince Gilligan; USA, AMC, 43–58 mins x 62 eps.

The Rockford Files (NBC, 1974–1980)

Life on Mars (BBC, 2006–2007)

Ashes to Ashes (BBC, 2008–2010)

Life on Mars (ABC, 2008–2009)

Cracker (1993–1996), Cr: Jimmy McGovern; UK, Granada Television for ITV; 100 mins x 24 eps.

Hearts and Minds (1995), Cr: Jimmy McGovern; UK, Alomo Productions/WitzEnd Productions for Channel 4; 65 mins x 4 eps.

Accused (2010–2012), Cr: Jimmy McGovern; UK, RSJ Films for BBC; 60 mins x 10 eps.

Children's Ward (1989–2000), Cr: Paul Abbott and Kay Mellor; UK, Granada Television for ITV, 30 mins eps.

Queer As Folk (1999–2000), Cr: Russell T. Davies; UK, Red Production Company for Channel 4, 48 mins x 10 eps

Doctor Who (1963–1989 & 2005–), Cr: Sydney Newman & Russell T. Davies; UK, BBC Wales for BBC, 45 min x 15 eps., 25 mins x 679 eps., and currently 45 mins x 48 eps., 50 mins x 3 eps. and 71 mins x 2 eps.